



SOUTHERN AFRICA: CONSERVATION UPSTREAM HELPS FEED USERS DOWNSTREAM

Resilience in the Limpopo Basin (RESILIM)

Duration: 2012–2017

Challenge

The Lowveld region of Zimbabwe sits in a high mountain catchment, serving as a virtual “water tower” for communities downstream along the Limpopo River. The Limpopo River Basin—consisting of four countries and more than 18 million people—is a critical lifeline in this water-strapped region. It includes two national capitals and important industrial, commercial, and agricultural sites, such as the world-famous Kruger and Matopos national parks.

Through the RESILIM (Resilience in the Limpopo Basin) program, USAID is helping villagers in the Gulati communal lands around Matopos restore community wetlands. During the 2015–2016 El Niño climate cycle, which resulted in the worst drought the region has seen in decades, these wetlands were critically degraded.

Opportunity

To restore the natural pulse of the waterway, USAID worked with the community and other donors in the region to add fencing around the wetland to prevent livestock access to the rehabilitation area and to limit groundwater pumping from the wetland area to allow water levels within the wetland to be restored.

A fence separates a fragile wetland from free-ranging livestock as part of a wetlands restoration effort. Photo credit: USAID/South Africa

Following the wetlands restoration, Mrs. Nkomo, the director of the community’s wetlands restoration project, commented, “We’ve seen more water in the wetlands than I remember seeing for years. The water is cleaner, and we’ve seen fish, bees, and other insects that we have not seen for a long time.”

High mountain catchment areas play a critical role in ensuring water supply, particularly as water storage declines during dry months, which represents the majority of the year in southern Africa. Because of their role in storing and distributing water, it is estimated that high mountain catchments supply 100 times more water per unit area than equivalent low-lying areas.

“Our crops have done better this year,” continued Mrs. Nkomo, a fact she credits to the revitalized bee and insect populations as a result of the wetlands restoration. Nearby villages, where the crops fared worse, are now considering wetlands restoration projects of their own.

Such impacts confirm the importance of water resource management. By investing in community wetlands in these high mountain catchment areas, local villagers benefit from restored ecosystems while communities, both in the immediate surrounding area and thousands of kilometers downstream, enjoy increased food security, more sustainable water supply, and expanded community resilience to climate challenges.